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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [MOPS](#) [MARR](#) [EUN](#) [FI](#)  
SUBJECT: FINLAND'S NEW GOVERNMENT: TURNING A PROMISING NEW  
TONE INTO SUBSTANCE

Classified By: POLCHIEF GREGORY THOME FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

#### SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION

11. (C) Finland's new center-right government is eager to reverse the malaise that often typified US-Finnish relations after 2003, and from the Foreign Minister on down a palpable shift in tone is already evident. Trans-Atlanticists have replaced notorious US-skeptics at the MFA, the MOD and elsewhere, offering us the chance to make real progress on several US regional security and freedom agenda initiatives. We now see enhanced Finnish participation in Afghanistan, in NATO-related security operations, and even in Guantanamo resettlement as very real possibilities.

12. (S) However, to achieve our goals we must move with some caution. Key ministers are sincere in saying they want to work with us, but the thorny task of undoing a legacy of entrenched "allergy" to NATO and knee-jerk opposition to American foreign policy will not happen overnight -- especially with President Halonen still in place for the next five years. With her Social Democratic allies now in opposition, the President's hand is weakened, but her skepticism toward US policy remains resilient and many of our key goals run contrary to her instincts. Our job, as we see it, will be to help the new center-right government solidify cooperation on our key agenda items, without putting Halonen in a position where she feels boxed in and assumes an aggressive, defensive posture. End Summary.

#### NEW TONE, NEW OPPORTUNITIES

13. (C) Finland's center-right government has been in office for fewer than two weeks, and already the new GOF has indicated to us in clear terms that its highest priorities include strengthening the relationship with the United States and reversing the malaise that has characterized the bilateral relationship over the past four years. Within the new coalition, the Conservative Party (KOK) has taken over nearly all the key foreign and security policy ministries, and the change in tone is already abundantly clear. Foreign Minister Ilkka Kanerva (who replaced Erkki Tuomioja, perhaps the biggest cynic in the previous GOF regarding US policy) has already met briefly with Secretary Rice at the NATO FMs' meeting in Oslo; visited the Embassy for a briefing on key issues (Reftel A); and sent his political advisor to meet our political section for a frank discussion of how to improve US-Finnish ties. Defense Minister Jyri Hakamies became the first MOD in Finnish history to openly announce that he favored Finland's joining NATO (after replacing Seppo

Kaariainen, a staunch opponent of NATO membership). And politicians from all parties -- as well as senior civil servants at the MFA and MOD -- have described the new government platform as unambiguously positive toward the US, and a clear departure in terms of tone from that of the previous government.

#### CONCRETE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROGRESS

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14. (S) In addition to adopting a new tone, the new GOF has already signaled a willingness to move forward on several initiatives of direct interest to the US. Over the medium- to long-term, we see concrete opportunities in the following areas:

-- AFGHANISTAN: Greater Finnish participation in NATO operations in Afghanistan appears feasible, to include additional troops and, over the longer term, leadership of a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). We do not expect the new GOF to reverse its predecessor's decision not to offer lethal equipment for Afghan security forces, as it would provoke an early confrontation with President Halonen; however, we see opportunities for non-lethal donations and will pursue them. Afghanistan will continue to be a major recipient of Finnish reconstruction and development aid, and the Finns will continue their successful model of targeting aid in support of PRT activities.

-- NATO RESPONSE FORCE: The new GOF sees the logic of participating in the NRF, both as a complement to EU Battlegroup activities and as a means of advancing Finland's international crisis management goals. Finland has Battlegroup commitments through summer 2008, but may be willing to participate in an NRF thereafter.

HELSINKI 00000321 002 OF 003

Notably, President Halonen's initial pessimism toward the idea has softened.

-- STRATEGIC AIRLIFT CONSORTIUM: The new GOF appears eager to join Sweden as the second non-NATO participant. Budgetary issues remain to be worked out, but MOD sources are pleased with the new government's interest in this initiative.

-- GUANTANAMO RESETTLEMENT: The previous GOF was a sharp critic of the US facility at Guantanamo, but consistently rejected our requests to address the problem by resettling detainees. Legal hurdles still exist, but the new government has quietly shown the political will to explore resettling a small number. It is imperative that the Department obtain from the Pentagon requested information about the circumstances and reasons for the detainees' incarceration for this issue to move forward.

-- MANPADS: We are hopeful that Finland will transfer several decommissioned SA-18s to the US. The willingness of the GOF to entertain our request promptly again indicates the shift in tone we are seeing.

15. (C) In addition to these concrete initiatives that are already in progress, Finnish civil servants and political appointees have reached out to us to inquire about other areas in which we could possibly cooperate. We have suggested several areas of the US Freedom Agenda, including a more pro-active role in fostering democracy and civil society in Russia and the Caucasus; more direct engagement with the US on Muslim outreach and combating extremism; increased support to Belorussian dissidents through the International Humanities University in Vilnius; support for former Finnish President Ahtisaari's plan for Kosovo; real leadership in Europe on combating trafficking-in-

persons; and support for continued EU engagement with Turkey and keeping the accession process alive (note: the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Olli Rehn, is a Finn).

#### TOP DOWN CHANGE

16. (C) The GOF's proactive approach in reaching out to us is the most evident sign that it truly intends to reinvigorate the bilateral relationship. However, it will take some time for many of these initiatives to take shape. New ministers understand that they must find a way to undo the legacy of their predecessors -- a legacy that in many cases was marked by skepticism toward US policies and a pronounced Finnish political "allergy" toward NATO. Many senior diplomats and career MFA and MOD civil servants have openly expressed to us their enthusiasm for the new government's emphasis on improving trans-Atlantic relations. FM Kanerva and MOD Hakamies have emboldened these officials, with Kanerva actually instructing MFA personnel to be more proactive contacting the Embassy. Indeed, trans-Atlanticists within the ministries tell us that the stage is set for cooperative and constructive engagement with the US on a range of issues. However, bureaucratic cultures do not change overnight. In addition, the Conservative Party is big on enthusiasm but short on experience, having last held the post of Foreign Minister in the 1930s.

#### HANDLING HALONEN

17. (S) A far bigger challenge for both the GOF and us will be President Halonen. During her first six years in government, she and Foreign Minister Tuomioja promulgated a foreign policy line that emphasized EU and Russian relations over trans-Atlantic ties; extreme caution toward NATO; an increasingly knee-jerk resistance to many US foreign policy initiatives, especially in the wake of the Iraq War; and, in the case of Tuomioja, a penchant for unnecessarily antagonizing Washington even on issues where we agreed. Tuomioja is now in opposition, while the new government's platform highlights "the trans-Atlantic relationship" as among Finland's most important; specifically calls for steps to improve and strengthen ties to the United States; and, while stopping short of calling for Finland to join NATO, removes references to Finland as a "non-aligned country."

18. (S) That said, Halonen still retains constitutional

HELSINKI 00000321 003 OF 003

responsibility for formulating Finnish foreign policy -- a power she has interpreted broadly as a virtual veto over any issue she chooses. Both the new government platform and her Social Democratic allies' departure from government have weakened her hand, but they have not weakened her potential for side-tracking some initiatives of importance both to us and to the new GOF. On security policy issues in particular, Halonen remains the leader of the SDP's anti-NATO wing (which currently dominates SDP leadership but is not necessarily the majority) and is likely to greet some of the GOF initiatives listed above with skepticism. KOK leaders tell us they can work with Halonen, who has developed a reputation for reacting harshly (and often publicly) to proposals she initially disagrees with, and then softening her stance and responding well to internal dialogue. However, senior MFA and MOD officials also caution that she can be aggressive when she feels boxed in and could be quick to veto initiatives if pushed too hard or too quickly.

#### THE US ROLE

19. (C) The change of government in Finland is certain to

yield results on a range of issues that are favorable to US policy goals. Kanerva's early handshake with the Secretary in Oslo and the possibility of an S-Kanerva

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meeting in June have emboldened the government, making leaders feel that their early effort to change the tone has been noticed, and offering them encouragement to begin managing their trans-Atlantic agenda through the president's office.

¶10. (S) At the same time, we must do our part not to box Halonen in. For example, the new government's decision not to press for a lethal weapons donation for Afghanistan is a clear attempt to avoid an early confrontation with her, and is one we should respect in hopes of making progress elsewhere in Afghanistan. Likewise for protocol issues. The S-Kanerva meeting in June is clearly important, and the GOF will play it as a meeting of counterparts. However, Halonen remains extremely sensitive about the fact that she has not secured a long-requested meeting with President Bush; while this is appropriate from Washington's point of view given the President's other priorities, we should tread carefully because the Finns will continue to raise this. It will serve the interests of the US and the new GOF better to begin rebuilding the bilateral relationship at the foreign ministers' level, gauge the new government's progress in working with Halonen to deliver on items important to the US agenda, and determine later if meetings above the S level are warranted. To be sure, the GOF's new trans-Atlanticist program represents a sea-change in tone and emphasis as regards Finland's foreign and security policy; however, it's an uncharted sea for the Finns, and the government and foreign minister will need our help in translating that tone and good intent into substance.

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